Introduction

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Source: *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, FALL / AUTOMNE 2015, Vol. 38, No. 4, Special issue / Numéro spécial : Sex Acts in the Early Modern World (FALL / AUTOMNE 2015), pp. 7-17

Published by: Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43918944

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Introduction

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> You're sayin' a foot massage don't mean nothing, and I'm sayin' it does. I've given a million ladies a million foot massages and they all meant somethin'. We act like they don't, but they do.
>
> *Pulp Fiction*[1]

Where does sex begin and where does it end? This is a question that has absorbed gender theorists and literary scholars, as well as cultural and social historians, ever since Michel Foucault influentially asserted that sexual identities were a relatively modern development, and that prior to the nineteenth century, at least in western culture, there were no sexual identities, only sexual activities—some licit, others forbidden.[2]

"Sex acts" is a term that suggests that, whatever else it may be, sex is a cultural and social performance. It draws not only on Foucault's opposition between activity and identity, but also on Judith Butler's notion that gender is not a biological given but a series of performative actions.[3] Femininity and masculinity are performed or enacted in many non-sexual ways, but the performance of gender is central to the very concept of sexuality. What exactly constitutes a "sex act" depends on how one defines sex. Is sex defined primarily by pleasure, or in terms of procreation? Is it seen as a manifestation of affection, or it is the assertion of a power relation? Is it best understood in the context of individual desire, or as a transaction *between* people? Is it public or private?

1. Quentin Tarentino and Roger Avary, *Pulp Fiction*, screenplay, The Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDb), accessed 7 May 2014, http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Pulp-Fiction.html.

2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 43.

3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), esp. 107–93. See also Jennifer Harding, *Sex Acts: Practices of Femininity and Masculinity* (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

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Sex often seems self-evident, but the more one thinks about it, talks about it, examines it, and debates it, sex is anything but self-evident. Problems of definition abound. For example, in early modern England, much male discourse about sex was concerned with what one might call the economy of sperm. In this discourse, "spend" rather than "come" was the common term for orgasm.[4] In Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, for example, the braggart Parolles mocks any man who "hugs his kicky-wicky here at home, / Spending his manly marrow in her arms" rather than going to war (2.3.264–65).[5] In Galenic medical theory, sperm was thought to be concocted from blood, and its production used up a certain amount of bodily energy that might have otherwise been put to different purposes—in this case fighting instead of "hugging." In this context, the questions around sex acts deal with the employment of scarce resources. Was sperm spent or not? Was it spent appropriately? Did it result in conception? If one thinks of sex primarily in terms of ejaculation of sperm, is there sex without a (male) orgasm? This mode of understanding sexuality amply displays the masculine bias of much early modern discourse around sex: sex is something men do to others and should be understood primarily in terms of its effects on the male body. Although early modern medical discourse claimed that women also produced sperm,[6] and often focused on ways to promote female fertility, much early modern discourse about female sexuality—especially in the fields of morality and theology—was concerned more with issues of continence and chastity than on the expenditure of bodily energies.

Must the genital organs be involved in a sex act? If so, then anal stimulation that does not involve a penis would be outside the bounds of "sex." Though such acts would be intimate, they would not, by this definition, be sexual. Masturbation and oral sex, common topics of sexual discourse in our own period, were seldom mentioned in early modern writing. Were they unmentioned because they were shameful? Irrelevant? Disgusting? Banal? Were they sex acts or something else?

4. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) attests this usage in Pepys's *Diary* from 1662, but it was common earlier: s.v. "spend, v.1.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), September 2015.

5. All references to Shakespeare are to Stephen Greenblatt et al., ed., *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 2008).

6. Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 35–37. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 35–52.

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To complicate matters, the term "sex" was not used in early modern English to describe sexual activity. "Sex" was a term that described the biological categories of male and female, and was used relatively rarely in any case. By the late seventeenth century the word "sex" was sometimes used to refer to the genital organs. But the common modern use of the term to describe intimate relations involving genital stimulation, arousal, pleasure, intercourse, and orgasm did not arise until the early twentieth century.[7]

One could argue that, since the category "sex" did not exist, there were no "sex acts" in the early modern world at all, whatever lewd, lascivious, bawdy, whorish, licentious, naughty, lustful, and wanton behaviour people got up to.[8] This argument would be somewhat disingenuous, but it is still worth noting that our own category of "sex," which seems fundamental, natural, and timeless, is an anachronism in the early modern period. Moreover, most of the English terms used in the period to describe what we call "sex" had pejorative connotations.

Foucault's discussion of sexual *activity*—as opposed to sexual *identity*—is firmly placed in the context of restrictions and prohibitions on sexual behaviour. Here, too, boundaries are unclear. The early modern categories of whore and sodomite were both used to designate individuals engaged in disorderly sexuality, but while these categories were firmly rooted in sexual behaviours, they also referred to other modes of transgression that were not, strictly speaking, sexual in nature. From biblical times, whoredom was associated not only with sexual promiscuity, but also with idolatry.[9] In early modern England, the term was used to defame women who were outspoken or confrontational—they were said to be "whores of their tongue."[10] And though in present-day discourse

7. *OED*, s.v. "sex," definition 4b cites 1900 as the earliest attestation of "sex" in the sense of "physical contact between individuals involving sexual stimulation; sexual activity or behaviour, *spec.* sexual intercourse, copulation."

8. The following are the dates given in the *OED* for documented uses of these terms with a sexual connotation: lewd (1386), lascivious (1425), bawdy (1513), whorish (1552), licentious (1555), naughty (1562), lustful (1579), and wanton (1589).

9. Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 86–93.

10. On the connection between promiscuity, female speech, and issues of bodily containment, see for example Gail Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 47–50, 150–52.

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"sodomy" usually signifies anal sex, in the early modern period it designated a wide range of disorderly or transgressive sexual behaviour.[11] In other words, "sexual" in early modernity was not a discrete category cut off from other spheres of existence and activity. It was instead integrated into larger structures of discourse, meaning, and action.[12]

In the years since Foucault wrote on the history of sexuality, debates about what exactly constitutes sex have not been limited to scholarly debate but have often been at the forefront of popular culture. In retrospect, the 1990s seem to have been a particularly rich period in this regard—at least in the United States. In 1991, characters in the massively popular television show *Seinfeld* (whose most famous episode revolved around a masturbation contest) argued about whether kissing constituted sex or not, and jokingly defined sex as "when the nipple makes its first appearance."[13] In Quentin Tarentino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* there is a memorable debate over whether or not a foot massage constitutes sex. (And a follow-up discussion on whether or not foot massages and oral sex are analogous activities.)

Most famously of all, on 26 January 1998, at a White House press conference, when questioned about rumours that he had had an affair with a female intern, American President Bill Clinton memorably stated, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."[14] Later testimony revealed that Ms. Lewinsky and President Clinton had in fact had intimate relations, whether or not one would define them as sexual. Specifically, it seems that Ms. Lewinsky performed fellatio on the president and he inserted a cigar into her vagina.[15] If President Clinton truly believed that such acts did not constitute "sexual relations," his definition of a sex act did not include oral sex or the use of an object to stimulate the genitals. The legal wrangling over the definition of "sexual relations" continued as the case developed, with the president later

11. Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 19. On sodomy as a legal category in early modern England, see Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 41–53.

12. Ian Frederick Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38–39.

13. *Seinfeld*, Season 3, episode 29, *The Red Dot*, original air date: 11 December 1991.

14. "Lawyers Say He Is Distracted by Events: President Under Fire," *New York Times*, 27 January 1998, A1.

15. "Full Text of Findings Sent to Congress: The Starr Report," *New York Times*, 12 September 1998, B1.

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arguing that oral sex was not sex, and that a person is not engaging in sexual relations if he or she takes the passive role in an encounter. The implication was that President Clinton was defining "sexual relations" as penile-vaginal intercourse—a fairly limited definition by current standards.

The legal definition of "sexual relations" accepted for use in the case was problematic, to say the least:

> For the purposes of this deposition, a person engages in "sexual relations" when the person knowingly engages in or causes—
>
> 1) contact with the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks of any person with an intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desire of any person.
>
> "Contact" means intentional touching, either directly or through clothing.[16]

The problem here is the word "intent." As the subsequent development of the case demonstrated, it leads quickly to moot questions of what a person was thinking when they acted rather than the action itself. It also assumes that "sexual relations" are an active, intentional choice. That is, only the person initiating the contact is engaging in sexual relations.

These narrow definitions (a long way from "when the nipple makes its first appearance") were much mocked in the media, so much so that one suspects they were not widely shared by the general public. But what is to stop Bill Clinton or anyone else, whether early modern or postmodern, from having his or her own personal definition of what is and is not sexual activity? On some level, what constitutes "sex" is a subjective matter. And yet, the boundaries of the sexual are subject to legal definitions and penalties. What forms of sexual

16. H.DOC. 105–311 – Appendices to the Referral to the United States House of Representatives Pursuant to Title 28, United States Code, Section 595 (C) Submitted by the Office of the Independent Counsel. Volume 3. Deposition of William Jefferson Clinton, Jones V. Clinton, Document Supplement A. Tab 2: 1/17/98 Deposition Exhibit No. 1 – Definition of Sexual Relations, p. 393. Accessed online, 30 April 2014, http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CDOC-105hdoc311/pdf/GPO-CDOC-105hdoc311-3.pdf. Two other definitions were proposed but rejected for being too broad in their application: "2) contact between any part of the person's body or an object and the genitals or anus of another person; or 3) contact between the genitals or anus of the person and any part of another person's body." See also "President Weighs Admitting He Had Sexual Contacts," *New York Times*, 14 August 1998, A1.

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activity are forbidden? Which are understood to be abusive? Is rape a sexual act, a crime of violence, an act of theft, or all three? Is there any physical contact between two people that is *by definition* not sexual, or incapable of being sexualized? These are questions at the heart of both current and early modern cultural debates around sexuality, and they are rarely answered in a definitive fashion.

The essays in this volume all explore the limits and definitions of sexual activity in the early modern period. They are concerned with the intersection of sexual and medical discourses on the body; with perceptions and representations of same-sex eroticism; with the way books, plays, and images communicate eroticism to their readers; and with the relation of sexual desire to notions of bodily and social disorder. While they do not define the limits of debates over sex acts in the early modern period, they do suggest the richness of the evidence and the vitality of the discussion. They also build on and complement recent studies of sex acts and sexuality in the early modern period by Valerie Traub, Will Fisher, Diane Wolfthal, Mario DiGangi, and others.[17]

In the collection's opening essay, Mark Schachter analyzes the representation of sex between women in Latin commentaries on the satires of Juvenal, demonstrating that the first print commentaries in the 1470s focus in an unprecedented manner on female ejaculation and on the expenditure of so-called female sperm. Schachter focuses in particular on interpretations of a passage in Juvenal's misogynist sixth satire that describes a pair of Roman women who visit the altar of Chastity at night and first urinate and then "ride one another with no man present." Both early and late medieval commentaries on this passage recognize its erotic nature, but do not comment on sex between women as such. A fourteenth-century manuscript commentary, on the other hand, describes the sexual contact between the women as rubbing, a description that recalls the early modern term *tribade*, a word based on the Greek word for

17. Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge, 2002); Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge, 2006); Diane Wolfthal, *In and Out of the Marital Bed: Seeing Sex in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Mario DiGangi, *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). See also the essays collected in *Sex Acts in Early Modern Italy: Practice, Performance, Perversion, Punishment*, ed. Allison Levy (New York: Ashgate, 2010) and *Sex Before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, ed. James M. Bromley and Will Stockton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

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rubbing used to describe women who engage in sex with other women. The same commentary also suggests that what Juvenal refers to as urine is in fact female sperm. In other words, the women do not urinate at the altar of Chastity—they ejaculate instead. Fifteenth-century printed commentaries on the passage are even more elaborate in their specifications and speculations about what the women in the poem are doing to desecrate Chastity's shrine. Schachter argues convincingly that in these commentaries one can see the establishment of a set of humanist commonplaces about sex between women, drawing on the poetry of Martial and Sappho as well as Juvenal. While some neo-Latin sources have been explored in this context, commentaries on classical texts have generally been neglected as a source of information on early modern attitudes about sexuality. Schachter's careful and detailed analysis of these commentaries leaves no doubt as to their importance for the history of sexuality and for understanding the construction of narratives around sex between women in the early modern period.

Mika Natif's essay analyzes the homoerotic passion and affection conveyed in a seventeenth-century illustration by the Mughal painter Govardhan that appears in a manuscript of Sa'dī's *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden), a collection of poems and prose tales that is one of the most renowned works of Persian literature. The *Gulistan*, originally written in 1258, contains several stories of male friendship and homoerotic intimacy, some of which are thought to be autobiographical; the historical Sa'dī openly engaged in homoerotic relations with young men and boys. Govardhan's illustration depicts the elderly poet Sa'dī facing a younger male friend in a beautiful garden. The friend grasps the poet's robe with one hand while dropping flowers at his feet with the other. Both men smile, while looking deeply into each other's eyes.

The intense gaze, the beauty of the garden setting, and the men's gestures all combine to create an atmosphere of erotic intimacy. Natif points out that the flowers being scattered from the hem of the young man's robe are represented in a way that may suggest ejaculation; the older poet holds his hand in a way that draws visual attention to his groin. Natif argues convincingly that the painter Govardhan drew on conventions of erotically charged Christian art to convey a powerful image of male-male intimacy and sensuality. In particular, she points to the *Noli me tangere* tradition, in which Mary Magdalene is represented in a landscape or garden setting trying to touch Christ's garments, and to the many images in which Doubting Thomas tentatively probes Christ's wound with his

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finger. Natif draws attention to the similarities between Govardhan's illustration and paintings by Titian and Francesco Salviati that portray a similar mix of hesitation and affection as that displayed in the illustration of Sa'dī and his companion. The essay concludes by reviewing the possible ways that a Mughal Indian painter like Govardhan might have been familiar with European religious painting.

Sarah Parker's essay on "Reading and Viewing Sex in Early Modern French Vernacular Medicine" addresses the relation between erotic knowledge and medical discourse in sixteenth-century France. On the one hand, university-educated physicians were working to establish a professional legitimacy that would separate them from the empirics and wise women who provided basic health-care services in most local communities. On the other, there was an impulse to provide medical information through the new market for books in the vernacular. The conflict between the impulse to restrict information and the desire to disseminate it was particularly fraught around issues of sexuality. In popular culture, doctors had long been mocked as lechers who used their profession to gain access to the bodies of attractive young patients, and this negative stereotype coloured public perceptions of the medical profession.

Parker compares two texts by French doctors aimed at a wide public, both of which include explicit information about the human reproductive system. Both these volumes attempt in diverse ways to exploit the eroticism implicit in male doctors' access to the bodies of their female patients in order to make the volumes more appealing to readers. The first of these two texts, Charles Estienne's anatomical treatise *La dissection des parties du corps humain* (Dissection of Parts of the Human Body) (1546), is lavishly illustrated with woodcuts depicting the particulars of human anatomy. Several of these images feature female bodies. Parker analyzes the eroticism of the ways that women's bodies are displayed in the text, focusing on their derivation from a series of erotic engravings by Jacopo Caraglio. The second text, Laurent Joubert's *Erreurs populaires* (Popular Errors) (1578), was aimed at a readership that included female patients, and deals openly with sexual issues around conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. Among other matters, it includes discussions on how to tell if a woman is a virgin, addresses concerns that a woman's vagina could poison a man who had intercourse with her, and debates the merits of breastfeeding. Parker demonstrates that Joubert's text was censured for dealing with such topics in the frank tone suitable to a medical school but considered inappropriate

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for a work dedicated to a noblewoman and addressed to an audience of respectable readers that included women. Taken together, both Estienne's and Joubert's volumes demonstrate the tension between a desire to professionalize medical practice and an impulse to profit from the dissemination of erotic images and texts.

Sergius Kodera explores the relations between gluttony and bestiality in the comedies of the Italian scholar and nobleman Giovan Battista Della Porta (ca. 1535–1615). In the early modern period, it was widely believed that sex between humans and animals could generate monstrous offspring. In his scholarly writings, Della Porta speculated on ways to produce monsters though crossbreeding species. Kodera relates this fascination with crossing species boundaries to Della Porta's portrayal of gluttonous characters in his plays. The glutton, a comic character archetype with an insatiable appetite for food, is often represented by Della Porta in ways that evoke a desire to mate with various animals. For example, both Panfago in Della Porta's *Carbonaria* and Lardone in his *Tabernaria* use the phrase "making love" ("fare l'amore") to express their desire to eat pork. Another character says that Lardone woos dead animals the same way others woo women. This equation of a hunger for meat with sexual desire occurs frequently in Della Porta's comedies, blurring the boundaries between sex and eating, between human and animal, and between transgressive sexuality and cannibalism. Della Porta's gluttons frequently fantasize about having monstrous bodies with elongated necks like storks or teeth like sharks, or about being able to eat as much as a whale. One even wishes to cut open his own stomach to put food directly in it, rather than waiting for it to go down his throat. Kodera relates these moments of comic hyperbole to passages in Della Porta's scholarly writing that posit that the form of the body is established by the nature of the soul. Thus, a spirit possessed of gluttonous desires would naturally develop a body that would facilitate those desires: the more excessive the appetite, the more monstrous the body that houses it. Kodera's essay provides a useful reminder of the ways in which the early modern period mixed symbolic and metaphorical thought with scientific knowledge.

Marlen Bidwell-Steiner's essay analyzes the representation of female sexual desire in Fernando de Rojas's *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (1499/1507), better known as *La Celestina*, after the name of its main character, a procuress. *La Celestina* is an ambiguous and multivalent text whose ideological meaning has been the subject of much contention. Bidwell-Steiner argues that the text's

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representation of female sexual desire serves to critique and destabilize common early modern notions of gender roles and sexual mores. She demonstrates that each act of sexual intercourse between the three heterosexual couples in the text serves as a defining moment that determines the characters' fates. In each case the female partner is empowered by the sexual act, whereas the male character is diminished by it. The female characters not only take pleasure in their sexual encounters, but they are also made more self-aware as a result of them. For the male characters, on the other hand, sexual experience only exacerbates their character flaws: lust, pride, and avarice. Moreover, all three male characters die shameful or ridiculous deaths (the protagonist Calisto, for example, accidently falls off a ladder) while the women end much better. The two female servants survive and thrive, and the noble heroine Melibea becomes an exalted martyr for love. Thus, Bidwell-Steiner argues, as a didactic text *La Celestina* has a different lesson for male and female readers. Male readers are warned of the dangers of love and sexual activity, whereas female readers are tacitly encouraged to find in sexual activity a path to both pleasure and self-knowledge. Bidwell-Steiner relates this paradoxical treatment of gender both to de Rojas's identity as a *converso*—a converted Jew—and to cabbalistic notions of fate associated with the medieval Catalan philosopher Ramón Llull.

The collection ends with Simone Chess's analysis of crossdressing, sex, and gender labour in John Lyly's play *Gallathea* (1592). The concept of gender labour, in which a partner participates in creating the subject's queer gender, originated in social science work on contemporary culture and has seldom previously been employed either to discuss fictional characters or in early modern studies. Lyly's *Gallathea*, on the other hand, is a play that has often been the focus of queer analysis, featuring as it does two female-to-male crossdressers, each of whom may believe the other to be male. To complicate matters further, on the early modern stage both of these "female" characters were played by boy actors. As Chess puts it, "the staged effect was of boys, dressed as girls, dressed as boys, in love." The polyvalent sexuality of the characters is only accentuated by the play's conclusion, in which Venus promises to make one of the two characters male so that they may marry—but the marriage is not staged and which of the two women will be transformed into a man is left unclear. The relationship of the two main characters can thus be read by modern readers as lesbian (two female characters in love with each other), gay (two boy actors playing feminine characters in masculine clothes in love with each other), and straight

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(a magically transgendered resolution, however vague, that results in marriage between a male and female). Chess sees the play not so much in terms of queer desire as such, but as a project of creating and maintaining gender identity, in which each of the two characters works to construct her partner's gender as well as her own. She relates the gender labour of the characters in *Gallathea* to that of modern couples in which one partner is a femme-identified cisgender female, the other a transgender male. Chess argues that the uncertainty in Lyly's characters about each other's gender (even after possible off-stage intimacy) represents a shared project "to mutually sustain and enjoy unknowing and androgyny." The play, like the characters, resists being specific about gender and refuses to define gender by genitalia.

The genesis of these essays was a series of five superb panels at the Renaissance Society of America meeting in San Diego in 2013, all organized by this issue's editors, Vanessa McCarthy and Amyrose McCue Gill. They brought together an enormous range of perspectives and expertise, from senior faculty to graduate students, dealing with a range of material from Italian literature to Indian art history. The panels dealt with high and low culture, with great art and ephemeral scribbling, with medicine, prisons, prostitutes, actors, scholars, farmers, noblemen, and women. The six essays in this volume, dealing as they do with English, Spanish, Italian, French, and Indian texts, with popular drama and classical poetry, with medical writing and the visual arts, offer a sampling of the range of discussions and debate over sex acts and their significance during the three days of sessions.

There may never be a consensus on what a foot massage means, but clearly it *does* mean something.

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